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STUDIES IN BALZAC

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF REALISM¹

I. DÉFINITION

The terms "realism and naturalism" have been bandied about until, like worn coins, their value is scarcely discernible. To add to the confusion, there is some authority for using the two words interchangeably. But for present purposes it is best to discriminate and define, and on the whole French and English critics leave one with the conviction that it is justifiable to make between realism and naturalism a distinction both of time and of degree. Chronologically, in nineteenth-century fiction, the best work of Balzac and of Flaubert stands for the earlier development of realism; while Zola and his school pushed that doctrine to its farthest extreme and baptized it *le Naturalisme*. To support the distinction, I may recall that M. Lanson does not include Balzac under his treatment of naturalism, which is happily defined by Mr. Wright² as an "acute form" of realism.

Then what is realism? Can we still say, as Littré did in the eighties, that it is an "attachement à la reproduction de la nature sans idéal"?³ But today we think of the "nature sans idéal" as rather the fetish of the naturalists. It is true that certain French critics, including Brunetière, use *réaliste* and *naturaliste* as practically synonymous. Else it would be difficult for Brunetière to maintain (for all his fulminations against the latter-day school) that "les romans de Balzac ne sont des romans que dans la mesure où ils sont naturalistes"; that Balzac was a naturalist in all senses of the word and that his excellence is to be judged by the degree to which he

¹ The first study in this series appeared in *Modern Philology*, XIII (1915), pp. 193-213, under the title of "Balzac and Cooper: *Les Choquans*." The present article attempts a synthesis of the various critical views of French realism, with the object of disengaging its qualities and factors as revealed in the *Comédie humaine*. The third study will deal with Balzac's method in general, and the fourth with the realistic method of one particular work.

² C. H. C. Wright, *History of French Literature*, p. 757.

³ Littré, *s.v.*

followed that doctrine.¹ Evidently Brunetière uses what he calls "le vrai naturalisme" as equivalent to our "realism," and it is in this sense that he defines the adjective, "naturalistes, c'est-à-dire . . . conformes à la réalité de la vie."² It is also in this sense that he quotes a seventeenth-century definition: "L'opinion qu'on appelle *naturaliste* . . . est celle qui estime nécessaire l'exacte imitation de la nature en toutes choses."

Call it which you please, we have in this passage a classic war-cry extended to the concreter realism, though the word "nature" still remains vague. That subject-matter is better delimited by Duranty, who probably gave points to Zola, in his journal entitled *le Réalisme*. He defines this term as "la reproduction exacte, complète, sincère, du milieu social, de l'époque où l'on vit."³ Thus in 1857—the date of *Madame Bovary*—the main articles of the creed were already posited as these four: exactness, completeness or universality of representation, truth, and the socio-historical approach.

The distinctions, from Brunetière's austere standpoint, between realism and naturalism are well stated in the *Avertissement* to *Le Roman naturaliste*.⁴ Brunetière says he wrote this book in order to "opposer les conditions d'un art vraiment naturaliste, qui sont: la probité de l'observation, la sympathie pour la souffrance, l'indulgence aux humbles, et la simplicité de l'exécution, aux caractères les plus généraux du naturalisme contemporain, lesquels sont au contraire la superstition de l'écriture 'artiste,' le pessimisme littéraire, et la recherche de la grossièreté."

Omitting the more exotic elements of the first formula, and bearing in mind especially the practice of Balzac and Flaubert, we may now arrive at a working definition of realism: It is the art of representing actuality, viewed largely from the material standpoint, in a way to produce as closely as possible the impression of truth.

¹ Brunetière, *Honoré de Balzac*, pp. 134–35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³ Quoted by Wright, p. 760.

⁴ Pp. ii–iii. Cf. Sainte-Beuve's famous diatribe, in *Nouveaux lundis*, IV, 137–38, where the critic, admitting reality to be the "fond de la vie," yet protests against mere photography and flatness and insists upon the adjuncts of style, sentiment, and idealism. In connection with *Madame Bovary*, Sainte-Beuve defined the qualities of the new realism as "science, esprit d'observation, maturité, force, un peu de dureté," *Causeries du lundi*, XIII, 363.

As for naturalism, it is virtually a *reductio ad absurdum* of the foregoing. The daring doctrine of Zola and Huysmans that Balzac was the master, whose method should be broadened by that of Stendhal to cover the psychological field, has really landed them in a field of quite another character. And their desire to exhibit "la vérité toute nue" has justified such epigrams as that of Saintsbury: "The ambition of the Naturalists was to mention the unmentionable with as much fulness of detail as possible."¹ Balzac may have instituted the exploitation of *la bête humaine*, but the naturalist who made the phrase famous was obsessed by its half-truth; the naturalist, says Meredith, "sees only the hog in nature and then takes nature for the hog."

II. GENERAL QUALITIES

In trying to establish a definition of realism, I have been led to anticipate its more usual qualities. Including those already given, as well as other more debatable characteristics, I submit the following list of features ascribable to various brands of realistic fiction. Reserving until later questions relative to technique and *procédés*, here are the main possibilities that realism presents in the realm of ideas:

- Truth, or correspondence with objective reality
- Materialism: Animalism, money, externality
- Impersonality
- The scientific viewpoint
- The claim to universality
- The documentary method, or technical erudition
- Tediousness
- Representation of mediocrity and triviality
- Solidity
- Sympathy with ordinary life
- Sociological features

Let us take these in order. The question of truth, as applied to any given picture of life, is usually the most difficult to decide. If a critic asks himself, Does this correspond to life as I know it?, the answer will frequently be, No. But one should proceed to a

¹ *History of French Literature*, p. 564.

further question, Does this correspond to life as I can readily conceive of it? Is it *vraisemblable*, if not absolutely *vrai*? And is the representation self-consistent? Then the answer, drawn from a good realist, is usually, Yes. In other words, the truth in Balzac may sometimes be a matter of simply reporting facts, but more frequently it will be a matter of transmuting and raising facts to the value of coherent and plausible symbols.

The critics are almost unanimous in praising Balzac's knowledge of reality and his power of conveying it in transmuted terms. "This is where Balzac remains unshaken," says Henry James, "—in our feeling that with all his faults . . . , his spirit has somehow paid for its knowledge." And he compares the French novelist to Shakespeare for his "charged consciousness of truth and his direct exposure of sensibility."¹

Brunetière, in the *Roman naturaliste*, disconcerts us a little by declaring that "Balzac, à proprement parler, n'est pas un réaliste." But why not? Because he transforms reality, because he does not make a servile copy—like the naturalists, as we would say. Brunetière is again juggling with our terms, but his opinion of Balzac stands out clearly enough: "Il met dans les caractères une logique, et dans les développements de la passion une suite"—which they do not have in real life.² Does that impair the artistic verity of monomaniacs like the Baron Hulot or Old Grandet, who say and do almost nothing that is not related to their master-passion? Brunetière, at least, does not think so. "Ils sont donc *vrais* . . . et ils sont vrais précisément en tant qu'ils cessent d'être *réels*."³ Elsewhere this critic declares that no one has the faculty of arriving at truth like Balzac and that in spite of his romantic side-shows, his grandiose characters and his crude mysticism, the *Comédie humaine* is largely a rehabilitation of "l'humble vérité."⁴

Similarly Saintsbury marvels at the novelist's "power of conferring apparent reality upon what the reader nevertheless feels to be imaginary and ideal. Everything is seen through a kind of distorting lens, yet the actual vision is defined with the most extraordinary

¹ H. James, *The Question of Our Speech; the Lesson of Balzac*, p. 94.

² *Roman naturaliste*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ *Honoré de Balzac*, pp. 127, 133.

precision and in the most vivid colors."¹ By the "actual vision," I suppose Saintsbury means the detailed presentment of each particular scene. If so, he agrees with Balzac's own dictum in the celebrated *Avant-propos de la Comédie humaine*: the law of the novel is to "tendre vers le beau idéal. . . . Mais le roman ne serait rien si, dans cet auguste mensonge, il n'était pas vrai dans les détails."² And elsewhere Balzac significantly reproves those vague idealists, like George Sand, who "courent dans le vide."

Balzac then told the truth—granted. But did he tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth? The phrases about the *auguste mensonge* and the "distorting lens" would make us doubt it, if we did not doubt it already. In that process of transmuting and solidifying reality, did he not mix some strange elements in the alembic? Romantic and melodramatic exaggeration of character and incident certainly play a large part in his novels. It seems clear also that, like Zola and the Goncourts, Balzac dwelt willingly on the exceptional and even the pathological. Leslie Stephen declares that no such world as Balzac's was possible, because no such world could have continued to exist.³ But due allowance must of course be made for the romancer's right to choose the extraordinary, even the criminally interesting.

It scarcely seems likely that Balzac laid equal emphasis on all sides of truth. Fromentin is quoted as saying of the naturalists: "Ils avaient l'air de révolutionnaires, parce qu'ils n'affectaient d'admettre que la moitié des vérités nécessaires."⁴ And Balzac himself laments that, since he painted things as they are, it has been foolishly said "que j'appartenais à l'école sensualiste et matérialiste."⁵

On the whole, his work does produce a materialistic effect. There is no denying it, and his own denials, it has been pointed out, are perfunctory.⁶ He was as frank a Rabelaisian as any, he believed in force, food, money, and things, and the real issue is to discover to

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 511.

² *Œuvres* (M. Lévy edition), I, 10.

³ *Hours in a Library*, I, 312. Yet Stephen admits Balzac's "intense realization of actors and scenery" and his "patient Dutch" artistry (pp. 271, 278).

⁴ Quoted by Brunetière, *Rom. nat.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Œuvres*, I, 11.

⁶ Pellissier, *Le mouvement littéraire au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 250.

what fictional values his materialism led him. Here one may consider Brunetière's onslaught against materialistic, especially naturalistic fiction: "C'est un art qui sacrifie la forme à la matière, le dessein à la couleur, le sentiment à la sensation, l'idéal au réel; qui ne recule ni devant la trivialité, la brutalité même, qui parle enfin son langage à la foule."¹ Among the questions that will repay investigation are these: does Balzac sacrifice form to matter, and if so, what is the effect on his style? Does he pile on sensations, colors, coarseness of language and treatment? Is he, like Zola, constantly comparing human beings to animals, according to the theory of the *Avant-propos*?² Or has he affinities with Stendhal, materializing psychology in terms of "la sensation, la physiologie, le fatalisme du tempérament?"³

It is evident that Balzac's materialism will affect the method and quantity of his description. Both Brunetière and Taine give a certain progression, the first logical, the second both logical and to some extent actual in its application to the novelist's method. Balzac, says the former, introduced the treatment of these chief material preoccupations: living, which depends upon eating, which depends upon money, which depends upon work, which depends upon a trade or profession. Then and thus would come the handling of "la diversité des conditions, chacune caractérisée par les traits qui lui sont propres," manifest in descriptions as well as in technically suitable dialogues and the very manipulations of the plot.⁴

The space given to money and to business affairs is among the most salient features of Balzac's work. His own business ventures gave him a knowledge in this field which he used better for imaginary people than for his own prosperity. He insists always on the importance of incomes and investments. Does he make these, e.g., in *Eugénie Grandet*, correspond to the knowledge and nature of the particular character? Such novels as *Le Cousin Pons* and *César Birotteau* require, in their different ways, very careful following of the financial moves. Even the careless young men of the Pension

¹ *Rom. nat.*, p. 3.

² The use of this analogy, which may be called animalism, will be more fully treated in the third study of this series.

³ Pellissier, p. 245.

⁴ *Rom. nat.*, pp. 63-64. For Taine's analysis of this, see subsequent study.

Vauquer, as Gautier points out, do not live poetically in the "mansardes de convention" and eat "des mets simples apprêtés par la main de la nature."¹ They are figured out much closer than that. Brunetière thinks Taine stresses too admiringly Balzac's preoccupation with the money basis. Not even a "naturalistic" novel should repose entirely on this foundation and money probably occupies less place in life than Balzac thought—"et pour cause."²

To pass to the next quality, does all this materialism of treatment mean that Balzac's world is mainly external, that he lacks psychological and spiritual insight? The consensus of opinion is that he lacks the second but not usually the first. Then how are his "souls" made up, if he shows us mainly the environment of body? What is his recipe for fusing a character out of a soul apparently considered at best only as a collection of qualities and sentiments? I do not know that one can answer such a question, for it may be that here we touch the secret of genius, the power of divination that Balzac accorded himself and that others have accorded him. But perhaps we can trace some of the ways in which Balzac at his best avoids the reproach of threatening externality. Brunetière suggests one way when he says that such books as *Eugénie Grandet* are not fortuitous masses of notes collected before the conception of the masterpiece and then crowded in. They are rather "œuvres composées par le dedans, et non pas fabriquées par le dehors." Therefore "la bricabracologie" occupies here only its lawful place.³ Still, in the lesser works—and in the high-life characters—one may suspect the predominance of bric-a-brac over psychology.

The claims of realism to impersonality and universality of treatment are closely connected with its scientific pretensions. We know how Flaubert fought for the impartial accent and how nearly he reached it in *Madame Bovary*. Zola makes of this "désintéressement" one of his chief doctrinal points. "Le romancier naturaliste affecte de disparaître complètement derrière l'action qu'il raconte." Such an attitude, he says, brings about the absence of moral judgments or indeed of any conclusiveness. Let us have nothing but

¹ Gautier, *Portraits contemporains*, p. 77.

² *Rom. nat.*, p. 65.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

facts. "L'auteur n'est pas un moraliste, mais un anatomiste qui se contente de dire ce qu'il trouve dans le cadavre humain." And he objects that Balzac is continually obtruding his own personality.¹

Now it is true that Balzac frequently interrupts the story with rather inartistic remarks. But what is their nature? Are they simply flamboyant interjections or do they constitute the more serious interference of partial or aggressively moral judgments? In any conflict, does he show too decidedly to which side he leans? If so, one may criticize his pretension to exploit all his known world in a highly scientific and self-suppressing manner.

Here is his famous statement of the scientific (biological) idea, in the *Avant-propos*.² After saying that his conception of the *Comédie* as an organism came from a comparison "entre l'humanité et l'animalité," he remarks on the triumph of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who showed the unity of composition of life (transformism) as modified into species by environment. Then: "Je vis que sous ce rapport, la société ressemblait à la nature. La société ne fait-elle pas de l'homme, suivant les milieux où son action se déploie, autant d'hommes différents qu'il y a de variétés en zoologie?" The conclusion is that there are "des espèces sociales comme il y a des espèces zoologiques."

Whatever the false analogies, the fertile consequences of this theory for Balzac's fiction impose themselves. It means primarily the division of mankind into trades and professions. It should mean the scientific attitude in the collection and presentation of facts. It should also mean, as Brunetière points out, not only an objectivity from the self-standpoint, but objectivity from the human standpoint, with a tendency to discard all anthropomorphism.³ Correspondingly, one may expect a certain interest in and development of other sciences—or pseudo-sciences—with the result that the whole earth may be viewed as a sphere for impartial observation. That is the universality I am speaking of, the realistic universality, which is to be carefully distinguished from the classical (Aristotelian) and romantic kinds. "La société française allait être l'historien, je ne

¹ Zola, *Les Romanciers naturalistes*, pp. 128-30.

² *Œuvres*, I, 2.

³ *Honoré de Balzac*, p. 161.

devais être que le secrétaire"¹—but a secretary who recorded all contemporary history. The *Comédie humaine* will then be a social organism, with its parts linked by the reappearing characters.

The next step will be in the documentary direction. Science, objects Brunetière, now tries to persuade artists "que toutes leurs 'observations,' même les plus vulgaires . . . par la seule vérité du détail et la fidélité photographique de la reproduction, conservent pour l'avenir une valeur assurée de témoignage historique."² In Balzac, two kinds of "documents" may be expected: technical disquisitions by the author, with display of erudition in many special fields, and the use of such actual documents as a proclamation by Napoleon or a business prospectus. More widely, there is the conscientious care in "getting up" a subject, the method of Flaubert in *Salammô*. With reference to this work, Brunetière has a whole damnatory article on "L'Erudition dans le roman."³ He also finds Balzac too much addicted to this specialization. The novelist's curiosity led him into various *enquêtes*, which transform several stories into so many "recueils de documents." *Le Cousin Pons*, for instance, contains half-a-dozen complete biographies which seem superfluous.⁴ Are they really so, or do they sufficiently justify themselves by furnishing that *scientific* solid basis which Brunetière admits? He objects more particularly to "le document physiologique et surtout pathologique." But diseases and deathbeds have their interest both of psychological revelation and of dramatic suspense.

The real dangers of the documentary method are, first, that art and science should not be identified in their aims and technique and, second, that the scientific pretensions of a Zola or a Balzac are likely to be based on superficial knowledge and a mistaken use of science. But be it science or pseudo-science, one is not dispensed from seeking the results, artistic or the reverse, of such influences upon Balzac's fiction. It is generally admitted that positivism and naturalism have many links, of which Taine's essay on Balzac is not the sole example. The novelist is characterized by Oscar Wilde⁵ as offering

¹ *Œuvres*, I, 5.

² *Rom. nat.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-48.

⁴ *Honoré de Balzac*, pp. 155, 158.

⁵ In *The Decay of Lying*.

a "most remarkable combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit." It is the latter quality which led Balzac to say and prove that his work had its geography, as it had its genealogy, places, things, persons, and facts.¹ One should then trace out Balzac's divisions and treatment of knowledge, observing how the artist's hand often modified the raw material.

Let us not claim that it always did so. Let us admit the charges of frequent tediousness and ponder its causes. Taine himself admits that Balzac's pedantry is often misplaced. For instance: "Mme Claës, au lit de mort, laisse échapper des allusions physiologiques et des axiomes métaphysiques dont heureusement elle était incapable." This then is the semi-scientific author, talking behind his character, with "ses grands mots, son argot scientifique, son fatras philosophique."²

Again, long-windedness may proceed from the superstition of universality, from the compulsion to tell everything. Is it true, as Wright says, that it is especially in Balzac's financial operations that we find "his documentary method, the detailed reproduction of procedure"?³ And this critic, among many others, complains of the tediousness of "description and enumeration, to the complete neglect of the plot." We shall have opportunity to test this apparent exaggeration; yet be it noted that even Taine observes that Balzac too often keeps us waiting and the essayist bluntly adds: "Il est désagréable de faire antichambre."⁴ Descriptions are too long and, what is perhaps more serious, they are sometimes obscure or not synthesized. "Une description n'est pas une peinture . . . ces compilations ne font rien voir." Only professional physiognomists could see the importance of the Chevalier de Valois' nose, as lengthily portrayed. Such long-windedness, Taine adds, "fausse l'impression," for the imagination sees the object in a flash.⁵ A Balzacian description should then be tested in these respects: does it harmonize solidly, does it lead us to visualize, does it require shortening? As will be seen later, a description does frequently harmonize around a central keynote.

¹ *Œuvres*, I, 14.

² Taine, *Nouveaux essais de critique et d'histoire*, p. 74.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 722.

⁴ Taine, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Through lack of restraint, it is certain that latter-day naturalists have drifted into a patient and pointless recording of everything, with a tendency toward mediocrity and triviality of representation. Zola thus defends the method. A typically naturalistic hero must be mediocre. To stage grand or gigantic protagonists, he says, is quite romantic—and Balzacian! Beauty does not consist in enlarging anything, since “an equal level abases all heads”; it consists rather “dans la vérité indiscutable du document humain.”¹

This is sternly intransigent, and we scarcely expect Balzac to measure up to that uninteresting standard. We may find that he still frequently gives heroic proportions to his figures, while making their *circumstances* mediocre or trivial. Brunetière objects to the realistic mania for reflecting “avec une minutieuse et puérile exactitude les moindres accidents de la réalité” and holds that one may represent the humblest lives and their circumstances only on this broad condition: “que dans la profondeur de leur abaissement on fasse luire un rayon d’idéal.”² Even “tales of mean streets” should be lifted from their environment and sympathetically universalized.

What results from the foregoing as to the two qualities of solidity of workmanship, on the one hand, and of sympathy with ordinary life on the other? Henry James, who thinks of our novelist as toiling through triviality “with huge feet fairly ploughing the sand of our desert,” nevertheless roundly declares that “Balzac stands almost alone as an extemporizer achieving closeness and weight, and whom closeness and weight have preserved. . . . Quantity and intensity are at once and together his sign . . . [he] did not press hard in some places only to bear lightly in others,” by falling into shallowness or sketchiness. Balzac doesn’t throw dust in our eyes. He “goes in . . . for a portentous clearness, a reproduction of the real on the scale of the real. Though . . . clearness sometimes fails”—that is, *we* fail to see the forest for the trees.³ Later, James states that “Balzac, like nature herself, abhorred a vacuum.”⁴

How is this effect of solidity attained in detail? It is admitted even by Brunetière, even for the half-dozen *dossiers* in *Le Cousin Pons*.

¹ Zola, *Romanciers naturalistes*, pp. 127–28.

² *Rom. nat.*, pp. 7, 11.

³ James, *The Lesson of Balzac*, pp. 70–79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

The most remote of these help to constitute *milieu* in the first place, and in the second they establish the characters, so to speak, on the *outside* of the story's needs and therefore in a kind of real life.¹ But is it worth while to build up an elaborate past for secondary characters in order that their brief appearances on the scene may accord with the careful "preparations" for their rôles? At any rate: "c'est ce qui donne aux 'dessous' des romans de Balzac leur incomparable solidité."

But Brunetière does not try to make out a case for Balzac as a sympathizer with humble life. That trait he finds mainly in the exotic realists, in Dickens and George Eliot, in Dostoievsky and other Russians. One should compare George Eliot's serenity, her large patience and penetration into the "lot" of the humble, with the sentimental "galimatias" of *Le Lys dans la Vallée*.² The danger of an overdone sympathy is, however, the danger of sentimentality. Pathos becomes bathos and the pathetic is really an inferior *genre*, because it confuses "l'émotion presque physique et l'émotion d'art."³

How does the main truth of this argument affect Balzac? Does it leave him merely sentimental in his not very frequent passages of pathos? Above all, does it leave him, with reference to the ordinary trend of life, sufficiently interested to retain our interest, whether or not he is moved to more overt sympathy?

The sociological preoccupations of Balzac have already been suggested in quotations from the *Avant-propos*⁴ and the subject will receive in a subsequent study the full treatment that it merits. I may indicate here that the *roman de moeurs* is, of its nature, concerned with social types, and that the titles of Balzac's novels frequently suggest his interest in a social status, category, or institution. The greater part of his generalizations and side remarks are also of this character. Brunetière emphasizes these sociological aspects of the *Comédie humaine*: the universality of depiction, the representation by classes, with close study of their *ressorts*, Balzac's crusade in behalf of the family, his Comtism and Catholicism.⁵

¹ *Honoré de Balzac*, pp. 156-57.

² *Rom. nat.*, pp. 210-23, *passim*.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ See *supra*, p. 358.

⁵ *Honoré de Balzac*, pp. 165 ff.

III. TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

In this division I will only throw out suggestions and provide a working skeleton which can be amplified or arranged to suit each novel. Balzac's fiction will offer generally these elements for analysis:

EXPOSITION: Topography. Order of the *données*. Quantity of space.

PLOT AND COMPOSITION: Cumulative effect. Use of documents and episodes.

CHARACTERS: Accumulation. Harmonizing. Order of the biographical and psychological data.

DESCRIPTION:

1. Subjects
 - a) Persons and dress (gestures, keynotes).
 - b) Indoor *milieu*.
 - c) Outdoor *milieu*. Topography.
 - d) Historical background—local color.
 - e) Of conditions and manners.
2. Kinds
 - a) *En masse*, concentered or not.
 - b) By scattered detail—repetitions, etc.

DETAIL: Multiplicity; characteristic or causal; vivid and picturesque; exact and historical; unrelated or insignificant.

STYLE:

1. Kind: Materialistic, technical, "artiste," cumbersome, colorless, or simple.
2. Components: Diction (proper names), technical terms, dialogue, figures, etc.

A Balzacian exposition, like the head of a comet, bulks larger than the rest and frequently tries the patience of the reader. The first thirty or forty pages, especially if there is no break¹ in the volume, will furnish most of the matter for analysis. Much might be quoted from Balzac in defense of his long expositions and descriptions. Occasionally he is apologetic, but more usually he is downright in declaring that such and such a preamble, topographical, socio-historical, or biographical, is essential to the thorough understanding of what follows. That is what the reader should decide

¹ In spite of the usual solid printing of the *Comédie humaine*, Balzac intended that chapter headings and divisions should appear.

in each individual case. Is it better, for instance, to give the personal history of a character at the beginning, simply and perhaps tiresomely, in the old-fashioned way? Or is it better to adopt the method of *in medias res*, as Brunetière praises it in Flaubert: to begin the story at once, then presently "immobilize" the person in a suitable moment of revery and recall within him the previous train of action?¹ In about one-third of his stories, Balzac uses some form of beginning *in medias res*; the question would be why he does so. Another arrangement, as employed by the clever technicians of our rapid days, is to avoid mass at any cost and scatter all forms of description and "informations"² in broken fragments throughout.

Is a Balzacian plot a simple or a complex affair? It is said to be fairly simple when the author is mainly interested in displaying character,³ and it is known to be very complex in such studies as *César Birotteau* and *Une Ténébreuse affaire*, which would require, according to Taine,⁴ a financier and a magistrate respectively to follow perfectly their convolutions. Occasionally we have a compound rather than a complex plot. The doubtfully cohering parts of *Le Cousin Pons* or of the *Histoire des Treize* provide a plot of this character. Several critics⁵ show how *La Femme de trente ans* is probably the worst case of such patchwork. It consists of six originally distinct short stories, hastily joined together. The heroine had for a time six names and she remains to this day six different characters.

But the critics⁶ mostly agree that Balzac's composition is usually of a superior kind, granting that he is at liberty to do something besides narrate. Admitting episodes, "encyclopedic zeal," documents of various kinds and descriptions galore, it is nevertheless contended that he fuses and inspires all this with his central idea. The point then is in each case to determine how such material is linked with the action of the story.

¹ *Le Roman naturaliste*, pp. 161, 163.

² Together, often, with dialogue and narration itself—a sort of driving four-in-hand. Flaubert's "tableaux" (e.g., the *comices agricoles*) probably set the pace for this technique.

³ Lawton, *Balzac*, p. 93.

⁴ *Nouveaux essais*, p. 71.

⁵ Lovenjoul, Le Breton, Lawton.

⁶ Taine, H. James, etc.

In narration proper, is the action swift or dilatory? Is it frequently "decomposed" into so many itemized parts, or what is the novelist's recipe for suggesting the flight of time in a way to combine artistic plausibility with few and simple indications? This has been praised as one of Balzac's best devices. Does he narrate by rapid dialogue in the manner of Dumas père and the *roman-feuilleton*? Perhaps the very simplicity of the straight narrative portions will leave them realistic and natural enough,¹ but less susceptible of analysis than the descriptions.

Balzac's characters rise up amid a cluttering environment. They need to be tremendously strong to pass Kipling's test of "standing on their feet," while, so to speak, their household goods sweep by in a flood. Therefore they are frequently monomaniacs, they are possessed by a ruling passion that dominates the book. "Mais ces types énormes," says Lanson, "sont réels, à force de détermination morale et physique."² Are they rather types than characters, or are they great as both? Balzac's own ideal was that they should "faire concurrence à l'état civil."³ Are the secondary characters equally differentiated and by what means? If they bear mainly trade-marks, they may incur Brunetière's dry objection that being a hardware merchant or a cobbler need not greatly differentiate the quality of one's loves or hates.⁴ Any character may become stressed by the repetition of a favorite *tic* or "gag," and the unrealistic side of Balzac may plunge him into the grotesque⁵ by way, perhaps, of reaction against dullness and triviality.

As to descriptions, much has already been said. In general, they may be examined for long-windedness and for the relationship of parts. In particular, with reference to any person, one should notice how his dress, physiognomy, and very gestures give the clue to his personality. It is in this connection that the keynote in description may often be determined.⁶ Why is Vautrin repeatedly

¹ Even when the game is hampered by technical documentation, says Lanson, "on croit que c'est arrivé" (*Hist. de la litt. franç.*, [8th ed.], p. 989).

² *Loc. cit.*

³ *Œuvres*, I, 3.

⁴ *Le Roman naturaliste*, p. 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶ See above, p. 360, and later, Study III.

said to have a "regard profond"? Why does Old Grandet stammer? What is the unifying feature of the detailed features of Marche-à-terre? What significance has the name of a character?

In passing to furniture and the like, one might ask, by way of transition, if Balzac often vivifies inanimate things in the manner of Hugo, Daudet, or Dickens, by making them serve as symbols or monsters. Here is his own opinion of the value of setting: "L'animal a peu de mobilier, il n'a ni arts ni sciences, tandis que l'homme, par une loi qui est à rechercher, tend à représenter ses mœurs, sa pensée et sa vie dans tout ce qu'il approprie à ses besoins."¹ This is the *coquille* idea: that the human animal leaves his imprint on his shell.² Brunetière doubts whether our way of dressing and our place of living are so universally linked with our manner of feeling.³ Yet he holds, somewhat contradictorily, that "les descriptions de Balzac ont toujours quelque raison d'être en dehors d'elles-mêmes" (whereas poetic and romantic description was its own excuse for being)—"et cette raison . . . étant toujours explicative des causes qui ont façonné dans le cours du temps les êtres ou les lieux, les descriptions de Balzac, rien qu'à ce titre, sont donc toujours historiques."⁴ That is, they will sometimes have a socio-historical rather than an immediately biographical value. Perhaps the house of the Claës, in the *Recherche de l'absolu*, would be a case in point.

When it comes to a wider topography, the same question of linking still asserts itself. Why, in *Les Chouans*, do we have such a minute description of the Breton countryside? What is the use made generally of local color and historical background? The former, by the way, besides dealing with customs, takes on frequently a philological aspect.

The description of conditions, status, etc., is supposed to be Balzac's *forte*. His novels are naturalistic, says Brunetière, "en premier lieu par la diversité des conditions qu'ils mettent en scène."⁵ In this connection only, the critic justifies the novelist's emphasis of money, as gained in a diversity of practical ways. Hence the

¹ *Œuvres*, I, 3.

² Cf. Taine, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

³ *Honoré de Balzac*, p. 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-40.

ways to gain it are described, made probable, and "realized" concretely in relation to each profession.

With reference to the kinds of description, it may be done *en masse* or *en détail*. In the former case, it should be noticed whether the whole thing is centered (as above mentioned) for one purpose or from one viewpoint. It is good art, for instance, to take the special viewpoint of a fictional observer and to describe nothing that he would not see. Or the description may be done from an inanimate viewpoint, as when Flaubert notes only those things that lie in the path of a ray of light. Did Balzac so restrict himself? It would be easier to find examples of his centering the description around a main idea, as in *Une Passion dans le désert*, where each touch added to the panther is in order to emphasize her resemblance to a woman. Incidentally, one should also observe the effect of repetitions and of *résumés*.

It is of course multiplied detail that makes a description, and there are those who affirm that Balzac multiplies where he should subtract. "This extravagance is his great fault," says Henry James, "in spite, too, of its all being detail vivified and related, characteristic and constructive."¹ Where is it essentially related and where not, and what effect has mere multiplicity and size upon the reader? Is it usually cumulative, and when it fails of this effect, is it because juxtaposition takes the place of coherence? At times there is certainly a plethora if not a mere juxtaposition of details in Balzac, and Brunetière even indicates this as his second chief claim to be called naturalistic—"par l'abondance, la précision et la minutie de ce genre de détails."² Where we do not recognize the necessity of this abundance, it may be due to our shortsightedness or it may be that Balzac is again possessed by the fetish of universality.

He himself assures us that there was a reason for everything he did. "En saisissant bien le sens de cette composition, on reconnaîtra que j'accorde aux faits constants, quotidiens . . . aux actes de la vie individuelle, à leurs causes et à leurs principes, autant d'importance que jusqu'alors les historiens en ont attaché aux évènements de la vie publique des nations."³ That leads us to speak

¹ *The Lesson of Balzac*, p. 85.

² *Honoré de Balzac*, p. 143.

³ *Œuvres*, I, 12.

of the causal detail, as I have called it, the detail which is truly a joint in the harness. "Il voit avec les détails les lois qui les gouvernent."¹ In Balzac's elaborate scaffoldings, one must evidently test the individual beams, for it is again a question of solidity.

The characteristic detail is slightly different. It may be the crown of causes, it may be simply the salient or the summarizing feature by which we remember a person, a landscape, a season. Brunetière chooses from Flaubert a number which precisely hit off a season or an hour.² From *Le Cousin Pons* I may instance the dirty knocker to Fraisier's place of business and from *Le Père Goriot*, in the direction of contrast, the statue of Cupid in the garden of the *pension*. With regard to persons, the characteristic detail often becomes simply a "gag," as in the case of Daudet's lazy actor, "who had not the right to renounce his art."

The picturesque detail is sometimes one and the same with the foregoing, or it may exist primarily for its own vividness. For instance, it is a frequent touch in fiction, found both in Balzac and Flaubert, to have sunlight strike upon the weapons of a distant army, revealing it distinctly for that moment.³

The exact and technical kind of detail scarcely needs definition. Brunetière notes that a number of this kind are brought in through money dealings.⁴ Maigron, in his book on the influence of Sir Walter Scott, observes that Balzac drew from that author "cette foule de détails précis—les seuls caractéristiques"⁵—and then applied them to everyday life. Balzac's care for exactness in detail is well known. He and Stendhal were practically the first to set themselves a severe standard for the depiction of contemporary life with minute precision. Balzac's journeys in search of close local color, his zeal in seeking for the right house, the right street, the right name—witness the Z. Marcas story—often brought the right results. Sometimes it led him into insignificant, merely photographic or microscopic representation. Sometimes detail is really useless,

¹ Taine, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

² *Le Roman naturaliste*, p. 168.

³ At the beginning of *Les Chouans* and of *Salammbô*.

⁴ *Honoré de Balzac*, p. 140.

⁵ Maigron, *Le Roman historique à l'époque romantique*, p. 230.

whether it is true or not; but occasionally also it gets its effect through being apparently unrelated. It may serve for contrast, it may serve simply to illustrate the indifference of things, as when Tess of the d'Urbervilles is attended, at a critical moment in her fortunes, by a piece of soiled paper blowing aimlessly about.

As to style, I will briefly suggest the possibilities. It may have in different places any or several of the characteristics enumerated. If it is materialized to start with, that kind of style is likely to bring certain of the other qualities in its train. What Brunetière indicates for another novelist may occur in Balzac. There may be something "lourdement sensuel" even in presumably idyllic parts, or the design may disappear "sous l'empâtement des couleurs."¹ In the heavy and involved passages, Balzac seems deliberately to thicken the medium through his desire to tell everything. There will be found Rabelaisian catalogues, exclamatory and rhetorical sentences, above all masses of technical expressions, for the use of the *mot propre* is considered one of Balzac's prominent traits. His style is adapted to all circumstances and is therefore by turns simple or forceful, pedantic or technical, sometimes "artiste," sometimes neologic or smacking of what he called "la bricabracologie"—which term is itself a monstrous neologism. Taine calls this style a gigantic chaos and remarks what effects are attained by comparison (through analogy and figures) of the scientific with the sentimental world. For instance, he quotes a gorgeous passage in which love is expressed in terms of botany.²

Such figures as these are not infrequent, and one may recall how George Eliot's scientific interests worked in a similar direction. There is also the more usual class of simply natural figures, sometimes employed with strict appropriateness: a farmer or a soldier will draw his comparisons from his own field. It would be worth while to observe whether Balzac makes much use of that inverted type of figure which expresses nature by comparisons with art. This is opposed to the Aristotelian tradition but is, I believe, fairly common in the nineteenth century. Does our author affect the Flaubertian kind of figure which Brunetière defines as "la traduction

¹ *Le Roman naturaliste*, p. 15.

² *Nouveaux essais*, pp. 91-92.

du sentiment par quelque sensation exactement correspondante."¹ Certainly, here as elsewhere, Balzac leans to exactness and vividness, and it will be desirable to pick out those figures which show most of these qualities.

In criticizing dialogue, the question of naturalness and appropriateness to each character should come first. What about Hulot's military slang and Rastignac's description of high life? Is dialogue interspersed with description, for relief and illustration? One may note the arrangement of single speeches between paragraphs of description; also speeches in chorus and "sliced dialogue." Henry James holds firmly that dialogue, admirable for illustration, should not be used for constructive purposes, and he believes that Balzac followed this "law."² On the contrary, we will find that Balzac frequently uses dialogue in order to narrate; and often it forwards the story in a dramatic way, because it is the way of the drama.

In this introductory study, I have been occupied with stating problems according to the critics and the general probabilities. Subsequent studies will endeavor to solve or illustrate these problems, keeping mainly to the analysis of realism here given.

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[*To be continued*]

¹ *Le Roman naturaliste*, pp. 156 f. An example would be Emma's dreams falling in the mud, like wounded swallows.

² James, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-12.